
HOW TO HOOK RELUCTANT MIDDLE GRADE READERS

WITH @JACKHEATHWRITER



How middle grade readers are different

Let me over-generalise for a moment. Middle grade readers differ from adult readers in the following ways:

- **They have more imagination.** You don't need to describe things in as much detail, because their youthful mind's eye will do most of the heavy lifting. Having said that...
- **They pick up less subtext.** You *do* need to describe how the characters are feeling and what they are thinking, because middle grade readers are less likely to sense it. However...
- **They are more interested in actions than thoughts and feelings.** YA novels tend to be focused on emotion. Middle grade novels should be focused on plot. (Novels for adults can go either way, depending on the genre.)
- **They can suspend their disbelief further.** You should include unlikely or impossible things, and please resist the urge to waste paragraphs justifying them. Middle grade readers either don't know or don't care how the real world works.
- **They are not patient.** If you take too long to get to the point, you will lose them. (This is true of both scenes and sentences.)
- **They do not care about adults.** The hardest part of plotting a middle grade novel is making sure it's the kids who get to do all the exciting stuff, but it's also the most important part.
- **What they read is determined by their parents.** This means you shouldn't include sex, drugs, suicide, coarse language, and so on. For the most part, middle grade readers are literally on the same page as their parents—they're not interested in adult themes anyway—but violence can be a tricky area. Middle grade readers will be more comfortable with it than their parents are. I've found the best balance is to include violence, but mostly off-page. (For example, the young hero investigates a murder but didn't actually *see* it. The killer *threatens* to hurt them but the protagonist escapes, and so on.) This could be why...
- **In Australia, middle grade fiction outsells fiction for adults and young adults.**



Focus on the strengths of literature.

Today's middle grade readers have more screen based entertainment than any previous generation, But a book is more than just a potential Netflix series. It has advantages that other artistic mediums do not. For example:

- **Sensation.** A screen does a great job of showing the viewer how something looks, but not how it feels. Use sensations liberally in your middle grade fiction.
- **Simile.** Sentences like “The man fell down the stairs and hit the ground like a dead rhinoceros” are only possible on the page.
- **Scale.** Movies are expensive to make. Books are not—so go big, or go home.

Getting kids to pick up your book

For the most part, a publisher is in a much better position to market a book than the author is. This goes double for middle-grade audiences, who aren't exposed to as much advertising in general (for very good reasons). But there are a few things you can do:

- **Make a book trailer, or get someone to make one for you.** Kids love Youtube. They're unlikely to stumble across your video, but their teacher (or teacher librarian, if they're lucky enough to have one) may show it to them. Beware—having no book trailer is better than having a terrible one (but having a medium-quality book trailer is better than none). The shorter the trailer is, the easier and cheaper it will be to make a good quality one. If you're doing it yourself, Canva.com is useful for making short, "just the cover and the voice-over" type videos. StoryBlocks.com is good for making movie-trailer style videos out of stock footage.
- **Put readings from your work online.** Find a really exciting chapter and read it, or better yet, a short story you've written. Resist the urge to add a long introduction, or plug your book at the end—if it's just the story, it'll be more useful as a classroom resource.
- **Focus on what kids are interested in *now*.** Forget what you liked when you were a kid—look at what non-book-related things middle graders are into *these days*, and write about them. If you have kids in that age group, or nieces and nephews, get them talking! If not, school visits are great, or you could befriend a teacher. (They're always happy to complain about the obsessions of their students.) If kids tell you they like Batman, you obviously can't write about him, but you can write about superheroes. If it turns out they like Minecraft, you can write about videogame worlds, and so on.
- **Get to the parents.** Parents of reluctant readers are always looking for ways to get their kid reading—and unlike children, parents are exposed to advertising. You can use Google or Facebook ads, but I'd also recommend markets, school fetes, etc. Connecting with readers or customers in person is far more effective than online.



Supercharge your writing time

Most authors have day jobs, and even for those who don't, time is limited. In *Deep Work*, Cal Newport says a state of deep concentration is only possible for a maximum of four hours per day, and reaching that level takes years of practice. Whether you're a full-time writer or working around other commitments, you only get a couple of hours per day, so it's important to make the most out of them.



- **Routine is powerful.** Constantly searching for writing time and trying to sneak it in here and there will not be as effective as having a particular time and place and sticking to it, however small. I get up at 05:45 and write until 07:15, Monday to Saturday. I don't have to decide to do it—I just do it, because it's my routine. I don't have to summon the muse, because she knows she's scheduled to be there. I *try* to write at other points during the day, and I often succeed, but I'm most productive during that crucial window.
- **Do the writing first.** As a general rule of life, it's a good idea to do things in order of importance rather than in order of urgency. My emails are all more urgent than my books, but none of them are more important. I make sure my manuscript is on the screen when I put my computer to sleep each night, so it's the first thing I see when I wake it up. (If my inbox is on the screen, I know from painful experience that I will not get any writing done the following day.)
- **If you're stuck on a scene, use bullet points.** It's very, very hard to decide what to say and how best to say it at the same time. When I find myself getting bogged down, I literally type, "OK, Jack. What's supposed to happen here? Well..." The act of writing stuff which the reader doesn't get to see switches off the proofreader part of my brain, making more room for the writer part.
- **Try a pen and paper.** If the bullet points don't work, getting away from the computer and using a pen and paper often helps.
- **Go for a walk, or a drive.** If you find yourself getting side-tracked by emails, social media, or research that isn't strictly necessary, get out of the office. Don't listen to a podcast, or anything else. Just let your mind wander. The 15-minute drive between my house and Westfield once solved a huge plot problem in *Kill Your Brother*, and I've used it many times since.
- **A healthy writer is a productive writer.** I've found that I'm most productive when I've A) had plenty of sleep, B) eaten plenty of veggies and not much else, and C) had plenty of exercise. Those three things are by no means easy, but they pay huge dividends when I sit down at my desk.
- **Beware social media.** It's occasionally useful in marketing a book and making connections, but the costs to your time and your brain probably outweigh the benefits.

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About the author

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Thanks to the Australian Society of Authors for having me!